

CRITICAL NEEDS OF PERFORMING ARTS TOURING AND PRESENTING

IN THE WEST

THE LINK TO ACCESS AND EXCELLENCE

As western state arts agencies are looking at severe cutbacks of state funding or outright elimination, the field of touring and presenting is most strained. The years 2003-04 and 2004-05 will prove to be critical ones for the field of performing arts touring and presenting, a unique and often invisible field of the arts.

How the field of touring and presenting by definition provides ACCESS and EXCELLENCE:

- Presenting organizations (“presenters”) operate in virtually every county of the West (including rural, urban and suburban areas), therefore, access to a variety of excellent performances is provided to almost all communities regardless of their distance from the home locations of professional performing artists.
- Tickets to performances are scaled in consideration of the population’s ability to pay, with offers of free tickets regularly made to selected groups in the community.
- As part of a presenter’s free or very low-cost service to the community and to maximize the effect of a visiting artist’s appearance for a community’s benefit, presenting organizations frequently provide professional performing arts services to K-12 students in their schools or in theaters, to the elderly in retirement homes and senior centers, to aspiring local students of the arts, etc.
- Presenting organizations are inherently capable of and virtually mandated to create new seasons *every year*; these annual seasons reflect new programming *and* new performers. With this functional flexibility, presenting organizations are able to choose, in essence, curate, the most excellent performing arts for their communities while simultaneously reflecting the interests and values of those communities.

How the field of touring and presenting is unique among the arts fields:

- Presenter organizations that focus on touring artists, unlike most producing resident arts organizations, *must* cooperate with their professional colleagues and colleague organizations to operate economically. This is a central tenet of the presenting field.
- Presenter cooperation is not restricted by state boundaries. Logical and well-planned artist tours often cross state boundaries. The viability of touring and presenting in one state affects all others, particularly those in regional proximity.
- Presenter cooperation is also key to making it possible for touring artists to earn a level of income that makes feasible their continued life in the arts.
- Presenting organizations and groups of touring artists use networking opportunities such as regional conferences not just as meeting places to discuss best practices and current issues (as is typical of other areas of the arts), but as essential arenas for cooperative *annual* planning of their seasons and for contract negotiation for their ever-changing programming.
- Presenting organizations, by their very nature, are *always* working with new touring soloists, ensembles and companies; their charge is to bring excellent *new* performers to host communities, more often than not, for the first time. These critical new professional relationships must be established quickly and effectively for this field to function well and for the public to be properly served.



- Because of the virtually limitless range of artists available for touring to presenters' communities, artistic excellence is the key component of those organizations' decision-making and competitive programming.
- Presenting organizations, by their very nature, are usually not discipline-specific (as are producing organizations). It is essential for presenters to know a great deal about a very wide variety of disciplines and genres. This knowledge is essential to properly address the needs of the touring artist, to market the artist to the host community, and to educate and inform audiences about the art form's context and its relationship to a community.

Why touring and presenting in the West is different:

- Those booking a tour of the West *must* recognize the greater distances between presenters that characterize the West's geography. With broad expanses of unpopulated areas, even tours booked from one small- or mid-sized community to the next are separated by vast miles that take significant amounts of time and money to traverse; this is stark contrast to the cost of touring in the East and Mid-West.
- Those booking a tour of the West must also recognize that there may be only indirect routes that touring artists must travel between seemingly close "as the crow flies" locations. Difficult terrain such as substantial mountain ranges or large bodies of water, and lack of convenient or adequate transportation often make the planning of a tour difficult. Additionally, direct-route roads may be inadequate for trucking large production equipment or may be impassable for long periods of the year due to weather conditions.
- While there are a large number of excellent artists in the West, a sizeable pool of touring artists are based in the East. Engaging touring artists from the East means assuming the additional expense associated with the higher travel costs caused by additional time, distance, and per diem requirements associated with transporting artists and their equipment to and around the West.

Who the presenting organizations of the West are:

- Large- and mid-sized presenting organizations are found in most states in the West. Though there are a few such "stand-alone" organizations, most of this size are "hosted" organizations, i.e., they are organizations, programs or departments encompassed within other entities such as universities and colleges. Many of these serve as lynchpin venues for regional tours.
- Smaller nonprofit presenters, particularly in rural areas tend to be "stand alone." However, some are encompassed within the parks departments or libraries of small cities.

Recent funding trends specific to touring and presenting:

- Several state arts agencies that have traditionally supported in-state touring have significantly decreased or eliminated this specialized funding and/or staffing for touring and presenting, due to legislative mandates to fund other types of arts activities.
- The hardship caused for presenting organizations by such state arts agency cuts is compounded by significant reductions in funding or opportunities to apply for state general operational support.
- When a state has substantial fiscal cutbacks, the impact is felt doubly by public college/university presenters because they are generally reliant on state funding for other portions of their budget and staffing.

- Local arts agencies tend not to fund touring and presenting activity, often choosing instead to support community arts organizations.
- The regional arts organization, which has traditionally helped fund in-region touring, has some funding increase. However, this increase cannot mitigate other funding losses and the size of grants has not increased in several years.
- Corporate funding for the arts has always been scarce in the West, a region with fewer corporate headquarters than other regions of the nation. Presenting organizations that are in rural areas traditionally have a particularly difficult time accessing corporate funding.
- While many key performing arts presenters are encompassed within other entities, particularly within universities or colleges, general funding cuts are often first and more deeply targeted to the arts than to other programs. This tendency is often solely the result of a less than advantageous placement in an organizational chart, rather than any considered evaluation of an arts program's value to the host institution.
- In addition, the larger institutions encompassing some presenting organizations may mandate that an excess profit be generated which could then be applied to other (often non-arts) areas. Generating such an imposing profit may require disregarding the organization's artistic and community service mission.
- Presenters have long been required to strike a balance between balanced budgets and a mission of presenting excellent artists to their communities. However, recently many organizations have been forced by economics to relinquish their artistic mission and now operate instead as rental houses for local amateur groups and for-profit booking companies that have a narrow profit-focused programming model.
- A major proportion of federal lands (non-revenue generating and non-taxable) are located in the West resulting in less revenue for local and state governments, and by extension for public funding for the arts.

What will happen without stability in this field:

- Performing arts presentations to the public and arts education services will diminish in number, quality, depth, impact, and diversity.
- The fundamental presenter network infrastructure will be irreparably damaged. This damage will not be easily or quickly reversed when better economic conditions return.
- Presenting organizations will erode or be eliminated, in many locations where there is no other entity to provide a similar access to artistic excellence.
- Touring artists and touring companies/ensembles will cease to be financially viable and their artistic quality will erode.

What can be done to support the field of touring and presenting:

- Map the fundamental presenter network in the West. Particularly identify ways to bolster college presenters that are lynchpin venues for the creation of cooperative and stable tours.
- Sustain and support this network so this field can continue to provide wide access to artistic excellence.
- Create a specific funding pool to support basic operational needs of the presenting network and its constituents.
- Strengthen cooperative and collaborative touring models to prepare for an efficient revitalization of the field when economic conditions improve.

Western Arts Alliance

